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Plan to put guns on planes brings dubious reaction

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A proposal to arm pilots raised eyebrows among lawmakers, airline workers and travelers yesterday, with most saying they would prefer to have better airport security and strengthened cockpit doors while leaving the handling of guns to well-trained air marshals.

The idea of training a cadre of volunteer pilots to use guns as a lethal defense against hijackers was presented yesterday to members of the U.S. House and Senate by the Air Line Pilots Association.

The pilots also called for at least two stun guns installed as standard equipment in the cockpit of each commercial jetliner, the hiring of additional plainclothes air marshals carrying guns and more than two dozen other security measures to help prevent hijackings.

Legislators doubted that arming pilots was a good idea, although the pilot's guns would be loaded with special bullets that could kill an attacker without piercing the skin of an aircraft and causing a sudden and potentially catastrophic decompression. They said the other proposals, including having stun guns in the cockpit, were probably more realistic.

"I view arming our airline pilots as a last-resort measure that, at this time, brings with it more questions than answers to our security concerns," said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, a member of the House aviation subcommittee.

Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, agreed.

"I don't support arming pilots. I don't believe we should have lots of weapons on airplanes."

Even House Majority Leader Dick Armey, a Texas Republican, said he would "have more of an affinity for" arming pilots with stun guns. But Armey said he was keeping an open mind.

Congress is expected to take up an air security bill as early as next week.

President Bush plans to announce his proposals to enhance airline safety tomorrow in Chicago. Some of Bush's Cabinet members said they plan to fly commercial jetliners Friday in order to build confidence in the nation's aviation system.

At yesterday's hearings on Capitol Hill, Capt. Duane Woerth, president of the 67,000-member Air Line Pilots Association presented more than two dozen proposals to improve security at airports and in the air.

IMMEDIATE SECURITY UPGRADE

He said that some could be accomplished almost immediately, like improving security training for flight crews and putting more air marshals aboard flights. But the more controversial measures, such as

arming pilots, would take longer to implement because of the training that such a plan would require.

Still, Woerth insisted, those measures are needed to guarantee safety in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.

"It is probably safe to say that the entire aviation industry . . . enjoyed a false sense of security before Sept. 11th," Woerth testified to the House Transportation Subcommittee on Aviation. "Unfortunately, that mind-set may well have been at the root of what enabled the 19 terrorists to perform their acts of unspeakable devastation on an unsuspecting and innocent public."

Before Sept. 11, the model for dealing with hijackers was to cooperate in the belief that the hijackers wanted to live and would not harm the passengers or crew. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon changed all that, said John Mazon, spokesman for the pilots' union.

"Pilots feel, at this point, we have to give the people in the cockpit a last line of defense, that last-ditch weapon," Mazon said.

Not all pilots agree.

"It's a rush to judgment. I don't think that's prudent at this point," said Bob Miller, a captain for United Parcel Service and president of the 26,000- member Coalition of Airline Pilots Associations, which is not associated with the Air Line Pilots Association.

THOROUGH SCREENING

Miller said the focus should be put on assuring that anyone with access to planes or the airfield undergoes a thorough background screening and improving the strength of cockpit doors.

But David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association, a passenger lobbying group, said the time has come to arm pilots.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," he said. "We wish that wasn't the case. . . . Right now all (pilots) have for protection is the crash ax and maybe a flashlight."

At San Francisco International Airport yesterday, Eliza Keating, who was waiting for a flight to South America, said she opposed arming pilots.

"A pilot can't fly the plane and land the plane and shoot terrorists at the same time," said the 18-year-old Minnesota resident. "I like the idea of the air marshals."

But Lynne Burns of Santa Rosa said the pilots must have a way to protect themselves.

"I think they should give them stun guns or pistols or whatever it takes," she said before boarding a flight to Chicago.

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